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## Hiding Behind the Flag?

The Reagan administration is seeking to invest government secrecy with the halo of national security, thus raising anew the conundrum of the press's right to inform vs. the government's need for security.

No doubt some reporters stretch the First Amendment too far. They believe that no government secret is worth respecting, that official secrecy is merely a device for covering up crimes, blunders and deceptions.

There are grounds for the press's skepticism. Government officials tend to lock their misjudgments and embarrassments in all the secrecy that security and patriotism can impose. They use the secrecy stamp less to safeguard the nation than to protect themselves.

Most officials would like to exercise veto power over disclosures that are damaging or offensive to their interests. I've learned that the louder the exhortations about security, the more likely I am to find a collection of Humpty Dumptys behind the secrecy shroud.

The worst offenders are in the Pentagon, where epic misjudgments and inexcusable blunders are first wrapped in the flag, then buried out of sight. When The Washington Post printed some cau-

tiously chosen details about the recent military space shuttle, for example, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger reached for the flag. He accused The Post of betraying vital secrets; he actually described the Post story as giving "aid and comfort to the enemy"—the constitutional definition of treason.

This was unadulterated rhetoric, and Weinberger knew it. In the technological age, it's impossible to hide a spy satellite in space. The Soviets have monitoring devices that tell them far more about the secret satellite than The Post told its readers. The only possible secret about the satellite that the Soviets might not know is its capability: what quality of intelligence is it sending back to the United States? The Post took pains to avoid even hinting at the satellite's capability.

Over the past year, my associate Dale Van Atta and I also learned several details about the new "Magnum" electronic intelligence satellites. But some of these details came too close to telling the Soviets something they might not know. So, like the Post, I didn't report them.

Other reporters have come upon information that might affect the nation's safety. But I have found them to be

every bit as patriotic as secretaries of defense. In fact, the worst security violators I know are political leaders who don't hesitate to release classified information if it will win support for their policies or help them squeeze money out of Congress. Often secret papers are shown to reporters by the same officials who condemn others for leaking papers.

If Weinberger gets away with his attempt to cloak our spy satellites in national security, the results could be dangerous. The United States and the Soviet Union are now taking tentative steps toward arms control, and the most important single factor to be considered is the capability of our intelligence agencies to verify Soviet compliance with arms treaties.

The public is entitled to know about the spy satellites that will carry the greatest burden of verification. Yet Weinberger wants to suppress even the most elementary information about these marvelous intelligence-gathering systems. This won't fool the Soviets, but it could hide a Pentagon snafu from the people who own the government and pay for its mistakes.

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